This Hat Of Broken Dreams

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"We kept this hat of broken dreams, and we pulled them out when we needed them around." A glimpse into what Carl Morck's life might have been when he was in his early 20's.

This is just my personal take on what part of Carl's backstory might look like, based on what has been suggested in canon, what Matthew Goode has said in interviews and theories that were discussed at length with other fans. Carl's actual canon backstory probably looks very different. Or somewhat different. Or slightly different. Who knows if we'll ever learn about it.

Title and fic inspired by the Matchbox Twenty song 'Kody'.

Trigger warning for drug use, self-harm, non-canonical violence and graphic injuries.

I should mention that "pigs" is a derogatory UK term for police and a "rig" is slang for the syringe and needle to inject heroin. Also please keep in mind that this is the late 1990's and people didn't necessarily have mobile phones yet. 🙄 (Yes, I am old enough to have experienced it first-hand.)

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Carl picks at the paper label on the beer bottle that is starting to peel in the top left corner. It's the cheap stuff, but it's what he can afford. Barely. This time around, they didn't ask for proof of age. He isn't sure if that was a fluke or if he's finally passing for an adult.

His long legs dangle over the edge of the concrete ping pong table. This is their spot – the abandoned youth park that hasn't been in use for however long he can remember. He's the first who's out here tonight. Simon, Mark and Cody might be dropping by later. Or maybe they won't. It's not like they have a fixed schedule.

The swooshing of the nearby M5 is familiar, almost like a comforting background hum. Sometimes it quiets the thoughts in his head that go on these wild spins that he fucking hates, that keep him up at night and make him hate himself even more than he already does.

He's tried drowning them out with alcohol, but he hates relinquishing control to an intoxicant more than he loves its numbing effects. He even tried heroin once, but 'bad trip' doesn't even begin to describe it, and he hated every second of it. He hasn't touched it since but he knows Cody is using more frequently and he isn't sure what to make of it. But ultimately, it's his decision to make, and Carl respects that.

Decisions are important to Carl. Decisions are what got him out of the shithole he grew up in and got him here. Well, it's not like 'here' is exactly the dog's bollocks, but it's out of reach of his piece of shit father and his apathetic mother. And that's *something*. He often thinks about his older sister, wishes he could have found a way to make her see the environment she grew up in wasn't normal, that it was actually fucking toxic.

His eyes land on the shattered windowpane of the display board opposite him that's now reflecting the last orange rays of the waning sun. Ragged cracks of broken glass branch outward from a central point of impact—from a stone or some other heavy object—like a spiderweb etched into the glass with a punch of finality.

He hears them before he sees them. Mark's loud laugh, Simon teasing him about something. Cody's American drawl that Carl doesn't particularly like but has gotten used to. They come into view as they round the corner of what used to be a club centre before it got taken over by pigeons and the occasional vagrant.

"Hey, Ceemo," they greet him. It's a stupid nickname but he likes it. It's like he finally belongs somewhere.

"Hey," he greets back and they give each other their usual man hug as they all hop up onto the ping pong table.

Simon drops the plastic bag with a few bottles of Labatt's on the table but then fishes something out of his jeans pocket. It's a small plastic bag with white powder in it. He holds up the trophy. "Scored a good deal on this," he says as he flashes a grin.

He prepares the lines on the table, beckons the others to get in on the fun. They're using a rolled up five quid note to snort it. Carl waves the offer off. "Nah, I'm good. Hand me one of those." He points at the bag with the lager.

"Suit yourself," Simon shrugs but holds out a bottle of the cool drink to him. "You'll miss out, mate, but hey."

Carl's fingertips are damp from the condensation as he takes the bottle. He opens it with practiced motion on the edge of the table and takes a swig, relishing the bitterness on his tongue.

The transformation he sees in his friends over the next few minutes is gradual but tangible, not just in the dilation of their pupils. They're getting louder, more boisterous, more euphoric. Mark brags about a recent female conquest in a way that Carl questions whether the sex was actually consensual. Simon talks a mile a minute, jumps from one topic to the next without rhyme or reason.

And Cody... Cody fidgets. He stares, his breathing becoming faster. The skin on his neck and face is flushed, and it makes Carl feel uneasy. Cody's eyes dart around, anxious and skittish. It

reminds Carl of a hunted animal, and for a moment he wonders where the fuck life went wrong for all of them.

It's like a hat of broken dreams that gets passed around. Cody dreamt of becoming a famous musician. Now he can barely make do with his busking, and he often tells stories of how he's being chased away by the pigs or some fucking arsehole running with his money. Mark wanted to open a record store but blew the funds before they were even really there. Simon always talked about moving to Australia to get out of here but then his visa got denied because of past trouble with the law.

So here they are, all stuck in their own personal circles of hell, trying to convince themselves they are choosing to stay in orbit.

Carl is pulled from his reverie as Mark playfully jabs his upper arm. "Oi, mate, you're such a fucking killjoy, d'you know that?"

Carl gives him a wan smile. "Shut the fuck up, wanker."

Mark makes a gesture with his fist in front of his privates, moving his hips back and forth. "When's the last time you had a good shag?"

"None of your fucking business."

Simon now joins the teasing. "Ooh, little Carly boy has no game with the ladies. What a fucking loser."

A bout of anger coalesces in Carl's gut. His hand twitches and he has an urge to punch both of them in the fucking face. He clenches his fist until his nails dig unpleasantly into his palm, takes another swig from the beer to try and quell the urge. He doesn't wanna punch his friends. Especially not when they're high as kites.

He jumps off the table, gives them the middle finger. The sudden movement makes Cody flinch. There's panic in his eyes, and Carl frowns. It feels like maybe there's a dangerous undercurrent here, like there's a thin line that, if crossed, might make something escalate. Maybe not into violence, but into something equally harmful.

"Loser!" Mark still teases, a cocky grin on his face.

"Captain Wank-A-Lot!" Simon joins in with a derisive laugh.

But it's Cody Carl pays more attention to now, the way his eyes flit to a group of three teenagers over by what was once a skate ramp. He points at them. "They keep whispering. You see them staring? They're planning something."

Carl takes a tentative step towards Cody. "Easy, mate. They're harmless."

"No," Cody protests. "They're planning something. I know it. We're all being tapped, they keep whispering about the bugs. Don't you hear it?"

Carl holds out a placatory hand. “Come on, Cody. You know these guys. You’ve seen them a million times.”

Cody now slides off the table, distress written all over his face. His fingers claw at the sleeves of his cheap sweatshirt, jerking it up to expose his lower arm, his index finger tracing upward as it digs into his skin. “It’s in there. They’re watching us, tracking our movements. Everyone. Everyone has one.”

And then, before Carl can do anything, Cody grabs Carl’s empty beer bottle and slams it against the edge of the ping pong table. The bottom splinters off, Cody’s hand curled around the bottleneck, jagged shards of glass protruding from it.

To Carl’s horror, he starts dragging it up his arm. Red blood starts welling from deep cuts and Cody is now screaming. It sounds more like fear than pain. Fuck. Carl knows he needs to stop this, needs to stop his friend from doing more harm.

He acts on pure instinct, tries to grab the bottle from Cody. He almost succeeds but not quite, dodges being cut himself by a mere inch. Cody is now in a full-on panic, writhing under Carl’s grip who is still desperately attempting to force the impromptu weapon out of Cody’s hand.

Carl can’t see his friends, yells in their general direction, “Some fucking help?!”

And then Mark is there, tackling Cody, pinning him to the ground. Cody’s still screaming unintelligible words, struggling against the both of them. Carl tries to get to Cody’s injured arm. There’s blood everywhere.

Carl looks up, sees Simon standing there, transfixed, unmoving. “Call a fucking ambulance!” When Simon doesn’t react, he screams. “Simon!”

That seems to shake him, he blinks. His and Carl’s eyes meet for a split second, then Simon starts moving, runs across the concrete. Carl hopes it’s to get help and not because he’s getting the fuck out of there.

The blood on Cody’s arm is slick and wet as Carl pushes his hand down on where it seems to bleed the most. Did he cut an artery? God, Carl hopes not, that would be fucking bad. Cody has stopped struggling, at least. Mark is still holding him down. There’s too much blood on the ground.

It takes way too long until they hear the sirens. Carl has taken off his jumper, has tried to wrap it around the wound to apply pressure. It’s crimson and getting more soaked by the minute.

When the paramedics take over and ask him to step away, Carl gets up, his arms hanging limp by his sides. He watches them as they staunch the bleeding, insert an IV, strap an oxygen mask to Cody’s head. One of them uses her radio. Mark is off to the side, emptying the contents of his stomach into a rubbish bin. Simon is standing there, staring, his hands at the back of his head, nervously rubbing his hair.

It doesn't take long until two police officers arrive. Carl sees momentary panic in Simon's eyes but it's too late to run now. The officers are on Carl and Simon first. They don't really bother with interrogation. Carl finds his hands yanked towards his back, handcuffs on his wrists before he can even really protest. He sees they're doing the same with Simon. Mark gets the fuck out of there before they can start chasing him. Fucking traitor.

"Why are you arresting me? I didn't do anything," Carl tries to defend himself.

"Shut your gob," the brown-haired, heavyset policeman snubs him, then strengthens the grip on Carl's wrists. Anger rises in Carl. What the fuck is happening? He hasn't committed any crime.

His rights are read to Carl, then both Carl and Simon are taken away. Carl tries to turn his head, watches out of the corner of his eye how Cody is being put on a trolley and loaded into the ambulance. "Where are you taking him?" he asks, but he doesn't get an answer.

A second police car has now arrived and he and Simon are taken away in the backseat of different cars. Carl tries to protest again. "I just helped my friend. I didn't bloody do anything! You have no right to take me."

It's to no avail. The pigs aren't interested in the truth. They just saw a bunch of young delinquents, signs of drug use and assumed a case of violence gone wrong.

The handcuffs dig uncomfortably into Carl's wrists as he is yanked out of the car and taken to processing. They finally uncuff him, and he rubs his aching wrists. There's dried blood all over his hands. He's patted down after he's asked to empty his pockets. They take what he has on him—his keys, his bus pass and the meagre amount of cash he has.

The burly officer accompanies him to a bathroom. "Get cleaned up," he tells him gruffly. "Don't try anything stupid."

The blood doesn't come off easily and Carl has to really work on it. The water in the sink turns a rosy pink. The smell of iron hangs in the air, now mixed with cheap soap. Carl swallows. What the hell is he doing here? Did Cody make it? This can't be happening, *shouldn't* be happening.

When he comes out of the bathroom, they guide him to a counter where a different officer lays out the fingerprint ink and asks him for his personal details.

"I need to know if my friend is still alive."

"You need to answer what you're being asked," the beefy officer states.

Carl balls his fists, turns towards the guy. He's angry now. This is all wrong! "Fucking tell me if Cody is still alive!?"

Fingers come around his upper arms in a vice-like grip, holding him in check. "Easy boy."

Carl hates the condescending tone, wants to punch the fucking guy in the face. The officer yanks him to the side, his hands still on his arms. “Listen here, boy. You’re in no position to make demands. You need to do what you’re being told, otherwise this is downhill fast from here. Do you understand?”

Carl inhales sharply, knows that he has absolutely no leverage. “Yes,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Can you repeat that, I didn’t hear you?”

“Yes,” Carl repeats more assertively.

The hands let go of his arms. “Good. Now do what you’re told.”

Carl goes through the motions, follows the instructions. He gets fingerprinted and photographed. He’s asked if he wants legal representation when he’s being interviewed, but Carl doesn’t really know what all the implications are and he surely doesn’t have a lawyer on call, nor the money to afford one. He shakes his head. They explain he can have someone appointed for him, but he declines, thinks it might make him look guilty.

The interview room they put him in couldn’t be more stereotypical. Bleak grey walls, a metal table and chairs. The two arresting officers sit opposite him. He’s interrogated, tells his version of events but leaves out the part about the drug use.

Of course they ask him about the cocaine. It was pretty obvious, really. He insists he didn’t take anything. The heavyset officer leans forward, looks him in the eyes. Carl can feel his garlicky breath on his face and tries hard not to gag.

When they’re done with the interrogation, they slide a form across the table. “We need your consent for blood and urine samples. Sign there.” The burly officer points to a line at the bottom.

The other officer pipes in. It’s the first time he’s speaking. He looks more gaunt, blond hair, blue eyes and a receding hairline, even though he doesn’t look all that old. “This is voluntary. You don’t have to consent to it.”

Carl looks at the other, burlier officer. His expression is carefully neutral. Maybe a bit of a scowl hidden underneath the hardened lines on his face. Carl thinks he’s a bully. He fucking hates bullies, but he signs the form anyway. It’s not like he has anything to hide.

When he puts the pen down, he looks at the blond officer. “Please tell me if Cody made it.”

Their eyes meet briefly and the officer says. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

At least that’s an honest answer. If anything, Carl can appreciate that.

They let Carl wait in the room for an indeterminate amount of time—maybe half an hour, maybe longer. He’s parched, his throat dry and his tongue like cardboard, but there’s nothing

here except the furniture and a two-way mirror that no doubt has someone watching on the other side. Carl tries to stay calm even though on the inside he's all jitters and nerves.

Finally, a woman comes into the room and deposits some medical equipment on the table. She puts on latex gloves and asks him to pull up his sleeve, then starts taking his blood. It takes two tries to get his vein and it fucking hurts the first time. An ugly bruise is already starting to form in the crook of his arm.

He's accompanied to the bathroom again with a lidded plastic cup in hand. He dutifully pees into it, washes his hands and uses the opportunity to gulp down some water from the tap before he hands the urine sample over.

Carl's hands are shaking, and it throws him. He shoves them in his pockets to keep them from trembling, which they don't, so hiding them from sight is the next best thing.

He doesn't know what's happening, finds himself being led through bleak hallways until he's asked to step into a cell. "Make yourself comfortable," is all the officer tells him.

"For how long?" he asks.

"I don't know. Depends."

"On what?"

"On what we decide."

That doesn't sound good. And it's still not right. "I didn't do anything," Carl repeats stupidly.

"Yeah, that remains to be seen."

"Look, I don't know how often I have to say it: I told you the bloody truth. Please. Tell me if Cody made it. *Please*." He knows it sounds like he's begging. He hates that he sounds so desperate, but what can he fucking do? He's locked up in a police cell like he's a fucking criminal. He's not. He's not a criminal. He just hung out with friends, had a beer, and then tried to salvage a situation gone horribly wrong. How is this fucking fair?

The officer leaves. The metal door clicks into its lock, the sound bouncing off the barren concrete walls with a finality Carl isn't ready for.

He stands there, in the middle of the room, surveying his surroundings. It's a fucking cell, like what you see in the movies. It's actually ironic how 'stereotypical prison cell' it looks. He turns around, takes in the thin grey mattress on the bunk against the wall, the metal toilet and sink in the corner.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets, holds them out in front of him, palms down. They're still shaking and there's a fluttering knot in his stomach that screams anxiety, anger, fear and despair all at once. It's overwhelming and he feels his knees are about to buckle.

He stumbles to the bunk, sinks down on it, dropping his head into his trembling hands, ignoring the dull pain in the crook of his arm from the now sizeable bruise. There are tears prickling behind his eyes and he presses the heels of his hands into them, drawing in a sharp, shaky breath that he tries to release slowly and more steadily to regain a semblance of composure. It works marginally, at best.

'Fuck," he thinks. Then yells it out loud. "Fuck!!"

It's just him and the concrete and a silence that's so loud that it echoes.

He's been through some pretty heavy shit in his life, but even though there's no one physically hurting him, he isn't sure if this isn't worse than his father's hand harshly slapping his cheek after nine-year-old him tried to stop that piece of shit from hitting his mother. Or his father's hand on his throat, pressing him so hard against a wall that his vision began to swim. Or his father ripping his favourite book up in front of his eyes, squeezing his arm with such force that it left reddish purple bruises. But this… This is a whole new level of punishment.

He somehow manages not to cry, manages to keep the panic at bay just enough not to fall apart. With the adrenaline seeping out of his bloodstream, it leaves in its wake an oppressive heaviness that drags along a numbing paralysis.

He sits there for an indeterminate amount of time in a state of loneliness he's never felt before. He realises now that there's a difference between feeling lonely but free and feeling alone while being confined against your will. He's never felt this horrible in his life.

His gaze catches on the bottom hem of his t-shirt. Uneven blotches of brownish red blood stain the fabric. Cody's blood. God, Cody. The lump in his throat grows in size and he swallows hard.

He jumps from the loud metal click of the lock on his cell door. It's the blond police officer from earlier, and Carl breathes a silent sigh of relief that it's not the fucking bully.

He hands Carl a plastic bottle with water. Carl takes it, clumsily screws the cap open with his stupidly dysfunctional fingers that still won't want to obey simple commands. The cool liquid feels good going down and he downs half the bottle in one go.

"Carl." To Carl's surprise, the police officer sits down next to Carl at the end of the bunk bed. "Can I call you Carl?"

Carl nods.

"I called the hospital. Your friend Cody is doing okay, under the circumstances. He's lost a lot of blood but he's alive. They're keeping him at RD&E."

Carl's chest does something strange, like it leaps with actual relief. His face briefly contorts with all the emotions that he can't put into words, then he exhales. Cody is alive!

He looks at the police officer and their eyes meet. Carl doesn't see resentment in them, doesn't see judgement. Not like from the other, burly guy. The officer speaks again.

“I don’t think I’ve properly introduced myself. I’m PC Harris.”

Carl nods again, because what else can he say? This isn’t exactly a ‘nice to meet you’ situation. “Okay,” he adds tentatively.

“We’ve gone over your story, and it seems to check out. The lab will hopefully confirm no drug use on your part when the results come back in a few days, but your friend and other witnesses corroborated your statements. We currently have no grounds to hold you here, so you’ll be free to go, provided you don’t leave the city until you’re fully cleared.”

It takes a moment to sink in, and more relief floods through Carl. “What about Simon?”

“He’ll be detained, we found evidence of cocaine possession and use.”

“For how long?”

Harris gives him an inscrutable look. “I’m not at liberty to discuss that with you, I’m afraid.”

“Will he go to prison?”

“Possibly. Depends on several factors that we’re still investigating.”

Carl isn’t sure how to feel about that. Simon’s a friend. A good friend. He doesn’t want to see him in prison. Harris’ voice makes Carl look back at him.

“Listen. I know this probably won’t mean much to you right now, but I’ve seen too many fellas like you. I have a feeling there’s a reason you didn’t get high when you had every opportunity to. Whatever that reason is, hold on to it, because it saved your friend’s life. *You* saved your friend’s life. And that fucking counts for something.”

The words hit somewhere in the vicinity of Carl’s stomach and his brow constricts with unfamiliar emotion. He isn’t sure when the last time was that someone said something this profound to him. It’s so long that he can’t remember. And that… that’s really fucking sad.

Harris isn’t done yet. “I don’t know you, and I don’t know what made you end up where you are right now. Just know that it’s not too late. It’s not too late to do something about it, to get your life on track, to do something that’s actually meaningful in this world.

“There are resources and people who can help you with that. You may not want to do anything with it right now, but if you ever feel like you want to, you can walk into this police station at any time and ask for me, yeah? If I’m here, I’ll come to talk to you. If I’m not, leave a number or a place where I can find you and I’ll reach out.”

“Okay,” Carl mutters.

Harris gives him a curt nod. “Now come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

They both get up and Carl follows Harris. He’s instructed to wait in the room where they took his fingerprints. Harris comes back with a plastic bag that has Carl’s measly belongings. He also

hands him a piece of clothing that looks like a grey sweatshirt. “You can keep it,” he tells Carl. He nods towards the door with the male toilet sign. “Clean yourself up.”

Carl doesn’t have to be told twice. When he looks in the mirror, he notices a faint blood smear on his temple that he seems to have missed before. The tap water is cold as he splashes it onto his face, but Carl welcomes how it jolts him back into this reality. There’s a strangely grounding quality to it.

After he’s dried his face with the scratchy paper towels, he slips the grey sweatshirt over his head and arms. It’s a good size too large, but that doesn’t matter. It’s super soft on the inside and it’s warm and it’s clean. It smells like a mix of laundry detergent and leather. It’s the nicest thing that Carl has worn in a long time.

He pulls his belongings out of the plastic bag and puts them back into his pockets. There are faint blood smears on his jeans too, but the fabric was dark to begin with and maybe they’ll wash out—if Carl can scrape together the money for the launderette.

Harris is gone when Carl comes out of the bathroom. The officer behind the counter gets up from his seat and opens a door for Carl, then escorts him to the hallway that leads to the front entrance, and Carl is a free man again.

He walks out, stands in the cool early autumn air, no idea what time it actually is. The streetlight several yards away shines a tepid yellow light onto the asphalt. Carl looks up. The sky is a deep, dark blue, interrupted only by pinpricks of white stars. A white streak catches his eye, and for a moment Carl thinks it’s a falling star, but it’s only the condensation trail from a plane.

He allows himself a small smile. Maybe he doesn’t need fucking shooting stars for luck. Maybe he can make his own.

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Carl carelessly discards his orange hard hat and ear protectors on the floor under the row of clothing hooks in the tiny hallway of his council estate flat. He hangs the faded safety vest on one of the hooks and toes off his steel-toe boots.

He can barely afford the place but it’s better than nothing and he can scrape by. He goes into the living room. His gaze wanders over to the couch, then the coffee table, looking for confirmation whether anything’s changed since this morning. Nope, nothing, no guitar case either. Everything is just as he left it.

He also checks the kitchen, but it’s all his usual halfway state between cluttered and curated. He doesn’t remember if he still has beers in the fridge and finds that he doesn’t. Instead, he grabs a glass and fills it with water from the tap, downing it bottoms-up.

He tries to recall how long it’s been since Cody dropped by. The two of them developed this weird kind of relationship between brother and friend where you were there for each other

when you needed it, no questions asked. But Carl is also worried, because Cody has been a lot flakier lately, has been turning up less and less.

They have this unspoken arrangement that Cody has a spare key and is welcome to crash on the couch any time he needs to. If he's being honest, Carl feels a little conflicted about it, because he often wishes they were more than just mates. Cody's soulful hazel eyes do things to him that make him want to grab the guy and kiss him. He's also noticed he has those dimples that deepen when he smiles, although lately he hasn't smiled nearly enough.

Three weeks ago, Carl found a discarded smack rig half hidden underneath the couch and it has him worried. He's pretty sure it's been over a week since he last saw Cody, and wonders if it's time that he actively goes looking for him. Maybe he'll wait another day or two.

He goes to the living room to plop down on the couch. The telly flickers to life with a push of the remote control, playing a corny American sitcom he's not overly interested in. He isn't sure if Nicola is going to come round later. Their relationship is tentative at best. A way to blow off steam, plus she's attractive in a slightly quirky kind of way and decent in bed. He's called her his girlfriend once, but isn't sure if that's what they really are.

He leans back and closes his eyes, letting the hubbub of the workday ebb away. He'd never pegged himself as this guy – site assistant for a construction company. The work isn't always easy and some days it's more taxing when by the time he gets home, his hands feel sore and his muscles ache all over from lugging around materials and equipment all day. Those days, he barely gets to brush his teeth before he crawls into bed, knackered as hell.

Thankfully, after half a year on the job, his foreman started noticing his keen eye for detail and learned to appreciate that Carl was always outspoken about seeing shortcomings with site setups. Sure, occasionally he'd face rebuttal of putting his nose where it didn't belong, but ultimately it was now paying off.

In the past two weeks, they started assigning him more and more oversight tasks. He's now in charge of making sure that work is being carried out safely and efficiently, even gets to suggest improvements. He never gets any of the credit, but he doesn't mind if it means the workplace becomes a safer environment.

Over the low murmur of the TV show playing in the background, Carl hears the familiar squeak of the back gate's hinge. He listens, waits for the sound of keys in the door, but it never comes. Maybe it was the scrawny tabby cat that prowls the neighbourhood. Or maybe it was just the wind.

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Two days later, Carl finds himself entering the police station he walked out of over a year ago.

He asks for PC Harris with the woman at the reception, waits and watches how the officer picks up the phone and makes a call. She tells him to wait on the wooden bench across the hall.

Harris appears a few minutes later, a small smile on his face as he sets eyes on Carl. He walks up to him. “Carl,” he says, adding, “if memory serves.”

“It does,” he responds appreciatively.

“What can I do for you? You doing okay?”

“Yeah. I’m good. This isn’t really about me. Do you… Is there a place we could talk?”

Harris leads him to a room off to the side that has a row of tables with chairs and a counter against the wall with a hot water urn, a selection of stacked mugs, a tin with tea bags and milk and sugar. Harris points at it. “You want any?”

Carl shakes his head. “No thanks, I’m good.”

They sit down at one of the tables and Carl fidgets with his fingers. He isn’t quite sure where to start, feels stupid now to even be here.

Harris gives him an encouraging nod. “Come on, out with it.”

Carl inhales. “You remember my friend Cody?”

“The one who got injured? I hope he made it.”

“Yeah. He did. But he’s… I know he’s using.”

“Skag?”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen him in a while. He used to come round, crash on my couch. Hasn’t been there in nearly two weeks. I found a rig under the couch a while back.”

Harris studies him closely. “And you’re worried?”

Carl sighs. “Yeah. I know it’s stupid. Maybe he’s just found a different place to stay or he’s—”

“It’s not stupid,” Harris interrupts him. “Do you know where he might be staying if he’s seeking drugs?”

Carl shakes his head again. He has no idea. They never talked about Cody’s drug habits. An unspoken law between them that this conversation was off-limits. “I don’t.”

“Want me to look into it?”

Yes. That’s why he came here. “That something you can do?”

“Of course. Do you have a current photo of him? I can send a patrol car out to check the usual haunts.”

“You can’t do it yourself?”

Harris smiles. “I’m a sergeant now.”

Oh. Okay. Carl looks at his hands on the table. “Not sure I have a photo. I’ll have to check at home.”

“And you? How are you doing?”

Carl looks up. It’s been a long time that anyone’s inquired about his wellbeing and was interested in an honest answer. “Okay, I guess. Found a job. It’s not great. You know, construction work.” He shrugs. “Could be worse. Pays the bills.”

Harris smiles again, and it looks very genuine. “Good for you.”

His gaze lingers on Carl for a moment longer, then he slaps his palms on his thighs and gets up. “A photo of Cody would really help.”

Carl also gets up. “I’ll look, drop it off if I find one.”

Harris nods. “Sure. We’ll do what we can.”

Carl mutters, “Thanks.”

“Any time.”

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It’s ten days later that Carl’s doorbell rings. Harris is standing there, police uniform and all. The look on his face is stern, and Carl knows this isn’t just a social visit. There’s an anxious pang in his stomach.

“Can I come in?” Harris asks.

“Sure.” Carl invites him in, feeling immediately self-conscious about the state of barely controlled disarray in the living room. Work’s been busy, he’s done lots of overtime and he just hasn’t been able to care much about non-essential tasks like tidying up his shit.

Harris sits down on the sofa and Carl joins him. Harris’ brow has a deep furrow between his eyes. “I’m afraid I don’t have good news.”

Carl had feared this, had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. “Is he dead?”

“Yes,” Harris says simply. “I’m very sorry.”

“How?”

“He was murdered.”

That throws Carl. He’d expected overdose. “Murdered? Why?”

“We’re not sure. He was stabbed multiple times, bled out in an abandoned building. Could have been drug related, could have been something else. They’re investigating it now, but I’ll be honest, I’m not sure it’s going to go anywhere. Cases like this, I’ve seen too many of them buried. I’m really sorry, Carl.”

Carl's mind is already spinning. Stabbed. Multiple times. He can't help but see a dark, faceless figure ramming a knife into Cody's abdomen, Cody falling to his knees, clutching his belly with a pained moan, dying alone, slowly, on a cold floor. Carl looks at his own hands, remembers how they were slick with Cody's blood after the incident with the broken bottle.

"Hey," he hears Harris' voice from somewhere far away. "Do you have anyone you can call?"

Carl isn't sure he understands the question. "Call?"

"To stay with you tonight."

Carl wants to laugh, lets out a cynical huff. "My girlfriend broke up with me last week."

"That a no?"

Carl just shrugs.

"Okay," Harris says, then gets up from the couch. He leaves the room, Carl hears faint noises from the kitchen.

Carl still can't fathom what he's just been told. It doesn't seem real. His eyes catch on a black t-shirt that's been carelessly discarded on the floor in the corner. It's Cody's. Carl knows the collar is slightly frayed and it has a Pink Floyd print on the front.

Tears fill his eyes and he leans forward, drops his head into his hands.

The couch dips as Harris sits back down next to him, this time a little closer. There's a clank of something on the coffee table in front of him. A warm hand is placed on Carl's shoulder, and he deflates under the touch, unable to stop the sobs that spill out of him.

The tea has gone lukewarm by the time Carl can bring himself to look up. Harris is still sitting next to him. Carl doesn't know if maybe he's tried talking to him in the last few minutes. He takes a sip of the tea, thinks it's too bitter without milk, but he's probably out of milk so it's not like this is Harris' fault.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"No need to apologise."

Carl doesn't know where this is coming from when he says, "They promoted me yesterday. Site supervisor. I was gonna… I was gonna tell Cody, maybe find a better place than this shithole. Somewhere we could both have a room. You know, help him get out. I wanted to—" The words catch in his throat and he needs a moment. "He deserved better than this."

"I'm sure he did."

Carl's expression hardens. "Promise me you'll catch the fucking bastard."

Harris shakes his head. "I can't make that promise, Carl. It's not my case, it's now with the homicide unit. I can try, but it's not like I have a huge amount of clout there."

Carl wants to punch something—punch something really fucking hard. He gets up from the couch, kicks a trainer that's lying there. It bounces off of the shelf on the opposite wall, kicking a book off of it.

Harris' voice is way too reasonable. "Carl. Please trust me that anger isn't going to help you."

"Fuck you," he snarls at Harris. "What the fuck do you know about anger?!"

Harris is now on his feet but stays off to the side. "More than you know."

Carl's toe hurts where he kicked the shoe with his socked foot and the fierceness of his anger quells a little.

Harris looks at his watch. "I'm really sorry, but I have to go now. But I wanna know that you'll be alright. Are you sure you can't call anyone? Some place I could take you?"

Carl inhales, then exhales slowly while he clenches his fist. "I'll be fine."

Harris' gaze lingers on him for a long moment. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I won't do anything stupid, if that's what you're worried about."

Harris fishes something from his chest pocket and holds it out to Carl. A business card. "My number. You can call anytime."

Carl takes it, not sure what to say. He's not used to someone extending a helping hand just like that. He's learned that there's always a string attached. He wonders what Harris' string is. Or, if there really isn't one, then why is he helping *him*—Carl?

Harris briefly puts his hand on Carl's shoulder as he passes on the way to the door. "Take care," he says.

"Thanks," Carl mutters.

The door clicks into its lock behind Harris, leaving Carl in the overwhelming silence of his own home that will never be broken again by Cody's moody tirades, his philosophical tangents or his boisterous laughter. This kind of silence—it's a God awful sound.

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Carl doesn't believe in fate. It's all coincidence, but he can acknowledge that some coincidences may be well-timed or even a certain stroke of luck. One of them is running across Sgt Harris at B&Q as Carl is picking something up for work a few weeks later.

Harris is in civilian clothes and Carl almost doesn't recognise him. It's Harris who stops Carl, calling his name.

"Sergeant Harris," he says, surprised.

Harris gives him a smile. "Hey. How are you doing?"

“Yeah, alright.” He gestures at his trolley that’s packed with wooden slats. “Kinda busy.”

“This for work?”

“Yeah. Running a few errands.”

“Okay. That’s good. Glad to see you again.”

“You too,” Carl responds. It sounds like a platitude, but Carl actually means it.

Harris turns around and walks away, but there’s something niggling at the back of Carl’s mind. He’s thought about it a lot since… since Cody died. He leaves the trolley where it is and jogs after Harris, calling out, “Sergeant.”

Harris stops, turns around. “Yes?”

Carl is a little out of breath now. “I, uh… There was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Well, then out with it.”

“Do you… do you have time later? Or some other day?”

“Tonight, 8 pm? Do you know the Hour Glass?”

Not a place Carl tends to frequent but he knows where it is. “Yeah. Near the quayside, right?”

“That’s the one. That work for you?”

“Sure. 8 pm.”

“Great. See you there.”

When evening rolls around, Carl tries his best to be at the Hour Glass Inn early. But then, in a hurry on his way out, he spills a glass of water all over his coffee table, and by the time he gets the worst of it mopped up, he is fashionably late and the bus driver is an arsehole who doesn’t wait for Carl, even though he sees him running after the bus.

Carls swears up a storm and arrives fifteen minutes late. To his relief, Harris is still there, waving him over from a table off to the side. Carl gets a pint and joins Harris, apologising profusely. Harris, of course, tells him not to worry about it.

Now sitting opposite Harris, the din of the pub creating a welcoming background lull and the taste of cold beer refreshing on his tongue, Carl lets himself relax. “Thanks for coming,” he tells Harris.

“Of course,” he replies easily.

He studies Carl. It makes Carl feel uneasy, like he’s trying to take in every small detail that might give him some clue about Carl’s state of mind. Carl figures it’s the policeman thing, an occupational hazard.

What also strikes Carl is how ironic it is that he's now sitting opposite this man, who is dressed in a hoodie and blue jeans, holding a sweating glass of cider when their very first meeting was snapping a pair of handcuffs on Carl and escorting him to the police station as the violent criminal they had first pegged him to be.

"You alright?" Harris inquires.

Carl takes another sip from his beer. "Yeah. I'm good."

"How the job working out?"

"Fine."

Harris gives him a look Carl doesn't know how to interpret. "Yeah. Now let's dispose of the fucking platitudes. Do you think I would be sitting here if I was going to be content with shallow bullshit answers like that? How are you really doing, Carl?"

Carl's finger fiddles with the brand logo that's etched into his pint glass. He sure hadn't expected *that*. He swallows, then gives Harris a slight shrug. "I don't know. Trying my best, I guess. Some days are hard."

Harris' mouth forms into a small but satisfied smile. "See, now we're getting somewhere. What you're going through, that's very normal. I hope you know that. One day at a time, right?"

"Yeah," Carl sighs.

"You know what else? You're sitting here with a decent pint, you've got a steady job, a place to live, and they already gave you a bloody promotion. That's something to be proud of. You know, knowing how this—" he points back and forth between the two of them, "—all started."

Yeah, how this all started. It still doesn't really compute for Carl how they even got here. Harris' eyes linger on Carl as he says, "But me giving you a good pep talk is not why we're here, is it?"

"No."

Carl knows why they're here, he's gone over it in his mind a hundred times, but now that it's on the table, he doesn't know how to ask.

Harris waits patiently, takes a drink from his cider. Carl thinks maybe he should dispose with the prelude and just get to the fucking point. He harrumphs nervously, then says, "I wanna take my A-Levels."

Harris raises his eyebrows. "Okay."

"I, uh... I really don't know how. Could you..." He lets that hang here, suddenly feeling stupid, like he has no right to ask this from a man who's practically a stranger.

"Help you?" Harris completes the sentence.

"Yeah." It's almost a whisper.

There's an amused smile playing at the corners of Harris' mouth. "Help you study, or what?"

"No. Like… where to even start?"

The smile spreads wider. "Sure. You wanna keep working while you do this? Take evening classes?"

"Yeah. I need the bloody money."

"There's options for sure. I'll have to look into it, but I'm happy to. You really sure you wanna do this? Won't be easy. It'll take some real commitment."

"I fucking hate construction. There's gotta be something better than that."

Harris nods. "Yeah, I get that. And I'll see what I can do to get you there." He looks up, meets Carl's eyes. "One more thing. I think it's time you called me Paul."

"Okay." There's a question that's swilling around in Carl's head. "Why?"

"Why am I offering my first name?"

"No. Why are you doing this?"

He seems to think that answer over for a good, long moment. "Cause sometimes people lose their way and just need a little help to get back on track. And if I can be that person when there's no one else who'll do it, then I'm gonna be that bloody person."

He smiles, then adds, "Or maybe it's just my hopeless helper syndrome."

"That's kinda—"

Harris raises a hand. "Don't give me the *'that's so noble'* bullshit. Just bloody run with it, okay?"

Carl returns the smile. "Okay."

Harris takes another large gulp from his cider. His expression is darker and more serious as he looks up again. "You remember what I said about the murder investigation?"

Carl frowns. "That it's unlikely they'll find who did it?"

"Yeah. They dropped the case. Fucking tragedy." He shrugs. "But that's how it goes sometimes. Some people just won't get the justice they deserve, and killers get to roam free and do it all over again. That's part of the job, too."

Harris picks at the edge of the cardboard coaster on the table that his pint glass stands on. Part of it has swollen from the water that slid down the side of the glass. "Wish I had better news for you. I'm really sorry."

It sucks. It really does. But it's not like Carl hadn't expected it. "Not your fault."

“Not yours either. I hope you’re not blaming yourself for any of this. Because none of this is on you. Drugs fuck with people. There’s some who’ll shake it, and some who never will. Maybe it’s brain chemistry or genetics or whatever. Maybe it’s just bad fucking luck.”

“So Cody will be a name on a fucking box in a police archive, and that’s it?”

Harris sighs. “Yeah, pretty much. And I wish there was something I could do about it. But that’s the thing. Some things, we just can’t control. You can get angry about it, you can yell and punch something, but it’s not gonna change a bloody thing.”

“So you choose to be fucking zen about it and draw a line under it? That how this works?”

“How it works for me.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I could be that callous.”

Harris’ face twitches with something more unpleasant. Maybe Carl’s pissed him off now. “This job is fucking brutal, son. We do what we have to to survive.”

Carl looks at the tabletop and studies a series of knotholes that look like the face of an owl. He thinks of Cody again, hates that he’s already having trouble remembering pertinent details. What exact shade of brown were his eyes? What shape were his eyebrows? What was the last thing Carl said to him?

Harris downs the last of his cider in one swift motion, then sets the glass down on the coaster. “Give me a ring next week, we’ll talk about evening classes.” He gets up, grabs his jacket from the chair next to him. “You’ve got my number.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

He turns around to face Carl before he goes. “It’s Paul. Get used to it.”

Carl sits and keeps staring at the owl face. He nurses his beer for another few minutes, then gets up and leaves.

The air is cool on his face – a harbinger of impending winter. The nearest bus stop isn’t far and he needs to change buses once to get to where he needs to go. As he nears his destination, memories resurface, unbidden and raw in a way that he wasn’t really prepared for.

He hasn’t been back to the youth park since the day Cody crashed and burned. He hasn’t seen Simon and Mark much since either. When Carl decided that his life had to change trajectories, they didn’t have much in common anymore.

Unlike Cody. Cody had stuck around. And now he was gone, too.

Carl finds his way to the ping pong table. The concrete is cold, the chilliness seeps through his jeans as he sits on it. He closes his eyes, remembers those days when they’d sipped cheap beer and tried to mend the cracks of their broken dreams.

He’s pulled from his reverie by the sound of glass shattering somewhere not far off. He looks over, sees a group of boys, one of them kicking the remnants of a shattered bottle on the ground, another uttering a derisive laugh. “Fucking loser, shut the fuck up!”

There's nothing to feel good about here, nothing he wants to remember of this place. He doesn’t belong here anymore.

He’ll call Paul in a few days because he now knows he wants nothing more than to get the fuck out of this rut he’s been stuck in for too long. Broken dreams be damned – he hopes this one isn’t beyond repair.